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ABSTRACT

Profiled in this document are two types of national organizations that were created to protect and lobby for college students' interests in the legal sphere. The Center for the Rights of Campus Journalists and The Student Press Law Center provide legal counsel and assistance to student publications that are confronted with censorship type legal problems. Also reviewed are five student-initiated national lobbying organizations--Coalition of Independent College and University Students, National Association of Students in State Colleges and Universities, National Student Lobby, U.S. National Student Association, and Public Interest Research Groups. The purpose of each organization and information on how to contact them is provided. Also described are the Research Project on Students and Collective Bargaining and the National Student Educational Fund. These two student-initiated organizations prepare research reports and publications related to student concerns and interests. (Author)

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Student-Initiated National Lobbying Organizations: A Current Profile

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Introduction

If the longevity of a college student generation can be described as four years, then two generations have been on campus since the end of the widely publicized student protest era of 1964-1971.

A current observation held by many people is that students in postsecondary education have returned to their former quiescent state so reminiscent of the 1950s. While it is true that the campus turmoil has largely quieted and that there are some parallels in student life-styles, new forms of student activism are now documentable. Students in postsecondary education are currently expanding their involvement in local politics, judicial processes, consumer protection, and in lobbying organizations at the campus, state, and national levels.

It is obvious that the issues on campus have clearly changed. Today, students are more concerned with pressing economic and academic issues that affect them on a personal level and in a day-to-day situation. Economic concerns include rising tuition and rent increases, insufficient financial aid and employment, and costs of commuting to campus. Academic issues involve student participation in collective bargaining, representation on governing boards, and faculty retrenchment.

Students are developing sophistication in the sphere of local politics. Serving as a prime example are the powerful student voting blocs that have been formed in communities where the student enrollment nearly equates or exceeds that of the local population.

Student involvement in the legal realm is also expanding. On campus the revised codification of student regulations and rules has brought increased attention to due process proceedings and to other guarantees provided by the Bill of Rights. Increasingly students are seeking a redress of grievances through the judicial system.

At least two legal oriented student rights organizations are currently in operation. The Center for the Rights of Campus Journalists (CRCJ) is a project initiated in 1973 by the College Press Service. The Service is a non-profit news service staffed by former college editors. The bimonthly CRCJ Bulletin is sent to the four hundred member newspapers of the College Press Service. CRCJ helps student papers involved in censorship disputes and other related legal problems. Contact: CRCJ College Press Service, 1764 Gilpin Street, Denver, CO 80218.

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The Student Press Law Center (SPLC), a joint project of the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press and the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial, is now in its second year of operation. SPLC serves as a national clearinghouse for information on the state of the First Amendment rights in the nation's universities and schools. It also provides direct legal assistance and advice to students experiencing censorship problems. The Reporters Committee also published a Press Censorship Newsletter, a compendium of recent legislation and judicial developments which affect the First Amendment rights of all media. Contact: SPLC, Room 1112, 1750 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W., Washington, DC 20006.

It can be expected that students will increase their monitoring of legislative and legal activity that affects them. The consumerism movement which has swept through the country has not left postsecondary education untouched. Both off and on campus, students are developing expertise in improving consumer protection and in dealing with related problems.[1] And there is some evidence that courts are today more attentive and supportive of consumerism as it affects the educational market place.

At the center of all these new expressions of activism is the students desire to participate as full citizens with concurrent adult status. A shift in tactics and strategies appears to be taking place. Overall, students are more inclined to work through the system to promote change and to increase their input in decisions that directly affect them.

The major area of student activity to be profiled here is that of student-initiated lobbying organizations that have recently been formed. Certainly student lobbying efforts are also taking place at the campus and state levels, but this discussion will be limited to five such organizations that operate at the national level. In addition, brief information will be provided about two student groups that generate research and publications dealing with student issues.

Student-Initiated National Lobbying Organizations

The Coalition of Independent College and University Students (COPUS)--the founding convention for COPUS was in Philadelphia in November, 1975 with student representatives from fourteen institutions. COPUS is a national organization that represents students in private higher education in the development of federal and state education financing policies. Its lobbying and research efforts to date have largely been in behalf of increases in financial aid support for programs such as the Basic Educational Opportunity Grants and scholarship programs.

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[1]For a comprehensive profile of the current writings on this topic see Consumer Protection Strategies: A Literature Review and Synthesis--Improving the Consumer Protection Function in Postsecondary Education by C. B. Helliwell and S. M. Jung. The report is available from American Institutes for Research, P.O. Box 1113, Palo Alto, CA 94302.

COPUS has chapters on individual campuses and, in some instances, receives funding from student governments. Contact: COPUS, 1730 Rhode Island Avenue, N.W., Suite 500, Washington, DC 20036.

National Association of Students in State Colleges and Universities (NASSCU)--was formed in March, 1976 by student leaders from more than two dozen institutions. NASSCU concentrates on problems of students at publicly-supported institutions and on issues that deal with education rather than politics.

NASSCU was formed in part to develop a distinct identity for students at public institutions offering bachelor degree programs.

National Student Lobby (NSL)--started in 1971, NSL is a nonpartisan political action group designed to operate exclusively as a political lobby representing students on education-related issues before the Congress of the United States. NSL is affiliated with campus student governments and individual students directly in its lobbying efforts through activities such as letter writing campaigns and testifying before congressional committees.

To date NSL activity has centered around general economic areas. Student Lobbyist, an occasional newsletter published by NSL, reports on both state and federal lobbying activities and the status of pertinent legislation and bills. Several state student lobbies have also been formed as part of NSL. Contact: NSL, 2000 P Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20036.

United States National Student Association (USNSA)--founded in 1947, USNSA was originally composed exclusively of student governing organizations on campuses. Formerly a social action group USNSA is now better known as the National Student Association. The organization is currently emphasizing lobbying and is focusing on issues that deal more directly with students themselves as it attempts to recast its role and image. Contact: USNSA, 2115 S Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20008.

Public Interest Research Groups (PIRGs)--were inspired by consumer advocate Ralph Nader in 1970. PIRGs are generally organized on the local college campus as research and action groups that operate in the public interest. Despite their representation of the general public, PIRGs are included here since they almost always operate with student momentum and frequently receive funding by voluntary student taxes collected at course registration periods.

PIRGs do not limit themselves exclusively to issues that directly affect students as students. Broader issues of local significance that affect students as adults more frequently are at the forefront of PIRGs activity. Examples would include preparing surveys of off-campus rentals, grocery prices, and available medical services, and studies of excessive utility rates.

The Citizen Action Group assists students in organizing the local autonomous PIRG. Each campus selects its own board of directors. Campus boards then select representatives to the state board of directors. Local PIRGs form a state wide PIRG; it is this group who decides overall goals, policies, projects and finances. Presently at least thirty-one state PIRGs are in operation. These state PIRGs are in the process of creating their own federation to be funded by joint contributions.

As mentioned earlier at least two student-initiated organizations prepare research reports and publications related to student concerns and interests. Research Project on Students and Collective Bargaining (RPSCB)--created in September, 1974 to study the impact of academic collective bargaining in postsecondary education and student response to faculty unionization. RPSCB is a special program of the University Student Senate of the City University of New York and is funded by a FIPSE grant. Contact: RPSCB, 2000 P Street, N.W., Suite 305, Washington, DC 20036.

National Student Educational Fund (NSEF)--investigates a broad variety of topics. Its goal is to provide research and information to national, state, and campus student organizations facing public policy issues. NSEF has prepared a number of handbooks that focus on consumerism as it affects students and has available a substantial list of publications. Contact: NSEF, 2000 P Street, Suite 305, N.W., Washington, DC 20036.

Commentary

This profile has essentially dealt with student lobbying groups that operate on a national scale. With their paid professional staffs, these organizations are much more sophisticated and have considerably more continuity in their programming efforts than in previous years. The remaining comments will deal with observations about student lobbying in the future.

As centralization of higher educational planning, policy formulation, and decision making occurs within state governing systems, it can be expected that students in multiple campus units will organize to provide a collective student voice. It seems safe to predict that the acceleration of lobbying activity by student-initiated groups at all levels will be in direct proportion to the volume of economic and academic pressures and inequities that students feel are being placed upon them.

On the horizon can be seen an increase in student unionism. The Student Association of the State University of New York is perhaps the most aggressive of student unions presently on campus. The Associated Students of the University of California have created The Student Lobby, a state-wide lobbying effort. However, the student union model common to European universities, as exemplified by the National Union of Students in Great Britain, has yet to be applied to any large degree in this country.

As of yet no single student-initiated organization fully represents the interests of all students in postsecondary education in this country. Whether there is a legitimate need for separate lobbying groups, including ones that represent distinct public and private student populations, is perhaps debatable. This division of student energy may soon produce a situation that, in fact, has nullified the overall goal to produce a unified student pressure force.

Will a unification of student lobbying organizations take effect in the near future? It seems reasonable to project that a closer liaison between these student groups will occur. Several of the lobbies could form a coalition to deal with significant issues of a national scope. The merger of two or more of the student-initiated lobbying groups profiled here could take place. Or one of the five student-initiated lobbying groups might emerge as the single most powerful lobbying organization with national student support. Another possibility is the creation of a totally new lobbying entity not currently in existence.

What does seem a certainty is that increased attention will be given to student lobbying organizations by those in a position to effect changes that directly involve students in higher education at the campus, state, and national levels. Any format that can generate a more harmonious exchange and relationship between students and the leaders in key positions will generate mutual dividends and lead to improved governance in higher education.

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